

# What Difference does Difference Make?

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## Review Article

*The African Difference: Discourse on Africanity and the Relativity of Cultures.*

by Oyekan Owomoyela

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African intellectuals, as Bennie Bunsie observed, are of two types—those who valorise and embrace the Western life-world and its values, language, science, philosophy, and culture and those who attempt to recover their lost heritage from centuries of colonial, foreign and imperialist domination. Central to the former is the explicit rejection of African identity politics that is based on the supposed belief that Africans as a group have certain essential characteristics that extend to all Africans. From this current emerges what Edward Said called varied groups of 'little Europes' that required the replication of the European (Western) ethos and the simultaneous devalorisation and depreciation of everything African.

The latter group finds perfect representation in Cheikh Anta Diop's excavation of pre-colonial African history and Aime Cesaire's *Return to my native land* which signalled the first articulation of the African's resentment and rejection of the kind of scientism believed to ground the arrogance of Western culture's self-image. As an alternative to the Western colonial episteme which he rejects, Cesaire calls upon Africans to affirm their own reality, life-world and authentic culture. Fundamentally, Owomoyela's *The African Difference* constitutes a continuation of Cesaire's project which puts strong emphasis on African difference. The chief difference between Cesaire and Owomoyela, however, is that while Cesaire's target was European colonialists, Owomoyela's chief target is not the colonialist *per se*, but the westernised and therefore alienated Africans seeking to 'obliterate racial and

ethnic identity or difference, and ... yearning for assimilation of and into the spirit of Europe' (p. x). Against this tendency, Owomoyela issues an invitation to the reader to join the battle for Africa or Africanness,

which is in a new and more difficult phase than during colonialism, more difficult because in the earlier phase the lines were drawn, and the choices were simple—submission to an alien rule or insistence on self-determination. The enemy was also easily identifiable: he was a foreigner and an oppressor. Now the issues are not so clear-cut and the adversary not so easily apparent. He/she is not necessarily foreign, and his/her rhetoric is often patriotic and bolstered with a concern, undoubtedly genuine for 'development', or scientific and technological advancement (p. xi).

Central to Owomoyela's project, therefore, is an attempt to show that Africans who reject differences in favour of Western universalism, presuppose the Western as the centre, a standard that decenters Africans and consigns them to the margins. Among the notable culprits under Owomoyela's attack are: Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992); Paulin Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1983); Kwasi Wiredu's *Philosophy and an African Culture* (1980); and a host of others.

*The African Difference* is a collection of essays originating, as the author says, 'from an unabashedly pro-African conviction' (p. x) and originally presented at conferences and published in various academic journals over the years. Their selection and publication together in book form is not without a guiding thread that binds them together. This unbreakable thread is the vigorous insistence on African difference, particularity and identity and a serious engagement with the historical, traditional and contemporary situation of the African continent. However, Owomoyela warns, this insistence on African difference and specificity is not merely to advocate difference for its own sake, but because the valorisation of the Western ethos by most influential Africans committed to Western values and culture, threatens the very existence of African historicity, culture, traditions and identity.

As will be evident, *The African Difference* is a hybrid text, deconstructively and reconstructively addressing a number of diverse, important issues that would require separate lengthy articles for adequate treatment. What we can however highlight are the major themes that constitute the core of the work. As its title suggests, the main concern of the text is a defence and valorisation of African uniqueness and difference in the face of constant and prolonged attacks. It is a search for, reconstruction and reconfiguration of 'African Identity' in the face of massive alienation, and a plea for African 'humanity' and 'dignity' against massive dehumanisation.

Despite the numerous important, interesting and contestable issues articulated in Owomoyela's text, I want to focus on only two of these, namely, the notion of 'difference'—which constitutes the main organising principle and aim of the text—and the 'Language Question'. First, I shall move from the premise that dialectically, discourse on 'difference' is simultaneously discourse on 'identity'. With this assumption, I shall therefore briefly show that conceptions of difference or identity constitute what one may call 'the politics of ambiguity', that is, that these notions function both as hegemonic and oppositional, as inclusionary and exclusionary and as straddling between essentialist and non-essentialist paradigms. This ambiguous character, however, signals a much more profound issue: power. Identity and difference, therefore, are concerns about domination, oppression, subordination, resistance, liberation, dignity and humanity; in short, relations of power. Second, through the mediation of Frantz Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, I examine the Language Question in post-colonial and post-apartheid conditions and argue for the equal centring of African languages as vehicles of African culture.

### **Difference and/or Identity**

Philosophically, the concept of identity designates 'the relation in which any object stands all by itself to itself' (Gasche 1994:205). Thus, from formal logic, the law of identity posits that a thing is the same as and implies itself. The metaphysical and ontological equivalence of this law may be discerned in Leibniz's law of indiscernibles according to which no two things in the universe are exactly the same; Schelling's idealistic philosophy of identity according to which the Absolute is the One in which nature and spirit, freedom and necessity are identical. In effect, the law of identity states that anything (A) is equal to and identical to itself. Which in turn means that a thing (A) cannot be different from itself, it is either itself or it is another thing (B). Construed in terms of Owomoyela's text, it would mean that an African possesses a unique African identity, no matter how constituted, different from any other and identical to itself. This Africanness constitutes the African difference.

The discourse of identity is by logical inversion, therefore, simultaneously the discourse of difference. Identity is inherently exclusionary precisely because it entails the existence of an Other who is not 'I' or 'we' and therefore different and excluded. As Sartre (1966:319) puts it,

it is by the very fact of being me that I exclude the Other. The Other is the one who excludes me by being himself (sic), the one I exclude by being myself.

In other words, all identities are constituted through their opposition to, and exclu-

sion of an Other. The reality of African difference would therefore require the presence of that which it negates and excludes for it to attain self-knowledge and self-consciousness. Similarly, its Other (the West) requires Africa for its own being. Both are therefore dialectically related to each other. *Ontologically*, therefore, difference is a necessary constituent of being. But, are differences politically, ideologically and/or culturally necessary?

There is much in Africa that requires defence against erasure and thus there is definitely a great deal to be said for Owomoyela's position of African difference. Indeed, this postmodernist 'politics of difference' contains creative responses of resistances to totalitarian regimes by marginalised, oppressed, discriminated against or dominated groups<sup>1</sup>. The valorisation of African cultural identity through 'Negritude', 'African Personality' and 'Black Consciousness' movements, for example, were an expression of oppositional resistance against cultural and racial degradation, imperialism, colonialism and dehumanisation. Sartre's (1988:296) real meaning in characterising these movements as 'antiracist racism' seems to have been missed. For, in terms of his perceptive dialectic, Negritude's 'antiracist racism' will, as a negative moment, dialectically lead to the ultimate transcendence of racial differences.

Today, Afrocentricity is such an oppositional resistance against the decentring Eurocentric discourse that parades as an incarnation and expression of universal human cultural essence. The politics of difference, therefore, functions effectively both as a critique of existing power relations and as a project of self-empowerment for marginalised groups. It is a weapon of those whose voices were silenced, whose histories were subsumed under the dominant outlook. As Cornel West (1993:4) puts it, the politics of difference is 'oppositional in contesting the mainstream for inclusion', it constitutes a means of resistance in the face of subordination and domination. Identity (difference) of any kind is indeed an important and essential aspect for many people to give meaning to their lives, vital for their secure sense of self-respect and thus essential for their sense of belonging

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<sup>1</sup> See Gregory Jusdanis (1996:105): [I]ndigenous peoples of North America have increasingly conflated their tribal differences into a politico-ethnic identity as Indians in order to seek resolution to their grievances more effectively. They have utilised a category already created by whites in pursuit of their interests. Latinos are also forming a pan-ethnic consciousness on the basis of the Spanish language and Latin heritage in response to the urban experience, racism, and government policies of welfare and affirmative action. Asian American are also defining themselves collectively as a distinct racial and ethnic community, a blend of geographically, culturally, and linguistically related groups.

and security. Identity politics, thus, has and still plays a liberatory role among the 'powerless'.

Besides its *ontological* exclusionary and inclusionary nature and thus its openness to all sorts of charges, prominent of which might be 'racism' or ethnocentrism<sup>2</sup>, African 'difference', seen in the light of the above, might also easily be subject to the popular charge of essentialism. For a thing that is always identical to itself is always the same, immutable, fixed and forever constant, hence identifiable as itself. In terms of ethnographic interpretation, each human group—ethnic group, race, or nation, has an essence that defines it and makes its members what they are: African, Indian, Chinese, European, etc. If the defining characteristic is culture, then that culture must be a stable and fixed whole in which individuals more or less fully participate, and in virtue of which participation they can properly be identified as Africans, Chinese or Europeans. Put differently, what is identical must always remain the same both in appearance and essence regardless of time and circumstances. It is therefore this essence or identity which, if mislaid or lost, must be brought back through rediscovery and excavations by means of language, myths, traditions etc.

Moreover, Owomoyela's constant use and endorsement of the locution 'traditional' and 'Africa' definitely generates a particular essentialist image of Africa. The term 'African traditional' as Campbell Mamoh (1985:79) correctly objects to those who foist it, ripples with images of naiveté, stagnation, low intellect, superstition, magic, immutability, fixation, and non-progression. Instead of this ideologically loaded and contestable term, 'traditional' people such as for example Fanon and Mamoh, speak of 'pre-colonial' or 'Ancient' Africa.

Owomoyela is aware of these difficulties and continuously attempts to distance himself from those assumptions 'whose effect has been to concoct an essentialist image of the African' (p. 132). In an anticipatory response he warns:

I will warn ... that the ensuing argument adopts the position that one can make valid general statements about Africa, Africans, African cultures, African relational habits and the like without necessarily suggesting a monolithic uniformity over the entire continent in any of the particulars. Furthermore, descriptions of, and assertions about, aspects of African life in the following pages cannot be construed as implying their eternal fixity and immutability through history (p. 167).

But this response would be appropriate if the charge, a la Hountondji, was that Owomoyela assumes Africans as a monolithic and homogeneous racial, and cultural

<sup>2</sup> See Neugebauer (1991:64f), for the charge of racism and invidious nationalism in discourse of African particularity.

group. Of course, east and west, south and north Africans are different. We cannot deny this, but at the same time we cannot set ourselves the trap of over-generalising from the existence of some differences among Africans to the existence of nothing but difference as deconstructive anti-essentialists do. Commonalities do indeed exist among Africans as among other groups.

I would assert that the peoples and cultures that spring to the 'educated mind at the mention of Africa have enough that is fundamental in common to legitimize significant generalizations, always with the understanding, of course, that all generalizations admit (and indeed presuppose) exceptions (p. 167).

Of course, one cannot deny these commonalities that constitute Africans as Africans, different from others. For example, Africans share common problems, history, experiences and cultural practices such as 'lobola' and an anthropocentrism which is community-centred and variously called 'communalism', 'African humanism' or known in Southern Africa as the much paraded and sometimes vulgarised '*Ubuntu*'<sup>3</sup>

... [T]he African individual is perceived as a member of a specific community, that is to say, his or her being-for-itself can only be linked to his or her being-with-others. The individual is essentially a relational being who gets significance and pertinence by his or her integration in a given human community (p. 178).

But there is more to the charge of essentialism than the mere accusation of homogeneity. It refers itself to the question: What is an African? This question has lately assumed ideological rather than metaphysical significance considering that one never, especially in the South African context, encounter a similar question about other groups. Such questions are never asked at all because it is presumed that they are fundamentally unaskable<sup>4</sup>. The question: 'What is an African', which should, like most questions of the type 'What is ...', be one about the defining essence of a thing which enables us to identify that thing (A) from any other thing (non-A) is fundamentally a metaphysical or ontological question. From a metaphysical (*ontological*) point of view, two laws—the law of essence and the law of existence—are operative. According to the law of essence, 'a thing can not be without being a

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<sup>3</sup> See Okolo (1995:13-26), for a detailed argument on the cultural sameness of African humanism. Also, see Steve Biko (1996), especially chapter 8.

<sup>4</sup> It is no accident that the only other groups subject to this kind of question are women and Jews. See Heinamaa (1997); Barker (1997) and Sartre (1948).

particular kind of thing'. The law of existence, on the other hand, states that 'a thing can not be a particular thing without being'. Owomoyela, understandably, is not interested in the metaphysical dimensions of the question, a question best left to philosophers. His concern is, rather, the existential dimension of the question which can be phrased in the following manner: 'What is to be an African?'

The notion of difference/identity may in certain situation also be an instrument of oppression, depending on prevailing power relations, as was the case with apartheid. This system, as we know, was based on a 'differentialist logic' that established group differences or identities as absolute, incommensurable and incompatible, based, presumably, first on biology and later ascribed to culture. The shift from biological to cultural difference was highlighted by De Klerk in the famous February 1990 speech in which he made repeated appeals to 'cultural difference', 'own affairs', 'group rights' and 'ways of life'. Disregarding the role of power in exclusionary or inclusionary practices, some critics may then, as we mentioned above, accuse Owomoyela of a racism predicated on 'differentialist logic'. Witness Christian Neugebauer's critique of ethnophilosophers for identity-thinking. Neugebauer, utilising the standard Marxist critique, views identity-thinking in Africa as the expression of a bourgeois class which is powerless to lead its society. African identity-thinking (including ethnophilosophy)

as a product of colonial and neo-colonial relations, is, in this perspective, tendentially a form of racism, as the fictitiously created 'tribal' (or 'African') identities are just the pre-forms of national or tribal chauvinism, equally fictitious superiority-claims, discrimination and finally racism (Van Hensbroek 1991:116).

In defence of Owomoyela, it might be instructive to notice that the problem with the deconstructive anti-essentialist such as Neugebauer, is that they erroneously attempt to deduce a normative politics of culture from an ontological conception of identity and difference. Consequently, they tend to see all identities as essentially fictional and repressive and all differences as essentially exclusionary without duly taking into account prevailing relations of power. Thus, what they posit, as Nancy Fraser (1996:69) observes, 'is tantamount to surrendering any possibility of distinguishing emancipatory and oppressive identity claims, benign and pernicious differences'. Besides, unlike the differentialist logic of Apartheid, Owomoyela (p. xi) does not at any time posit absolute African difference. As he himself says:

Difference simply for its own sake may be perverse; but antipathy towards difference in any form (call it alterity) is a worse form of malady, for its end is a loss of self and of identity, in other words, self-annihilation.

Moreover, to speak of Africanness, even though basically exclusionary in nature, does not necessarily constitute racism as such. It may just as well be to make a selection of a number of characteristics about Africans which are perceived to be common or equivalential, characteristics which are significant only in relation to, and in terms of the difference from, say, European or Asian. To differentiate between cultures, nationalities, and so on, cannot in itself count as an expression of racism. The reason of course, as we suggested earlier, is that racism is—among others—about power, and as Biko (1996:25) insisted: 'One cannot be a racist unless he has the power to subjugate'. In the global village, Africa at the moment, does not possess the power to exclude or include, subjugate or dominate. Therefore, difference does actually makes a difference depending on the possession of power.

## **The Language Question**

Owomoyela's text opens up with a piece on the postcolonial dilemma of writing in the (m)other tongue, a subject that has generated passionate responses from African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ama Ata Aidoo, Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Es'kia Mphahlele, and Wole Soyinka, among others. The 'Language Question' in African literature, indeed in African philosophy as well, has been one of the most contested issues in postcolonial discourse. Certainly, this problem has not been peculiar to literature and philosophy but has permeated the entire fabric of African social, political and cultural existence. Hence, in 'Language, Identity and Social Construction in African Literature' Owomoyela asks: 'What is the connection between language and cultural identity? What danger does the continued ascendancy of European languages pose for the vitality of African languages?' (p. 3). The significance of this chapter lies in its allusion to the thorny issue raised by Frantz Fanon concerning not only the indissociability of language from culture and philosophy, but also the claim that language is a technology of power.

In the main, two opposite theses may be identified, which we shall call: (a) The Retentionist Argument and (b) The Culturalist Argument. For the former position<sup>5</sup>, European languages play a socio-political unifying role in the midst of

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<sup>5</sup> In a piece that resulted in heavy contestations, 'Colonial Legacy and the Language Situation in Cameroon' Godfrey Tangwa, articulating the retentionist position, argues that: (a) There is no reason at all to regret the fact that foreign languages (English and French) have overtaken indigenous languages; (b) foreign languages, imposed on Africa by irreversible historical accidents, can be domesticated and used as vehicles for national unity, integration and development as well as for global dialogue; and (c) the search for an indigenous national language is unnecessary and politically inadvisable. Therefore, English or French must be the national language of Cameroon.



linguistic fissures created by a plethora of diverse linguistic segments of contemporary African communities. European languages serve as a cohesive, unifying force in Africa's postcolonial nations and therefore should be encouraged<sup>6</sup>. A lighter version of the retentionist position is what is called the 'domestication' thesis which is an attempt to marry African language phrasing with English, an English less marked by English culture. For example, Chinua Achebe, Es'kia Mphahlele and Gabriel Okara have attempted to develop this hybrid language in which English is localised in accordance with African idiom, metaphor, symbolism; the African experience<sup>7</sup>.

The Culturalists, referred to by Alamin Mazrui (1993) as neonationalist, reject the use of European languages in literature for the simple reason that to learn and speak a language, in Fanon's view, is to take on a world, a culture. According to this thesis, '[c]ultures have intimate links to particular languages: take a language away from a culture, replace it with another and that culture will be radically altered' (p. 5). Sadly, Owomoyela, whose position resonates with the culturalist argument, consciously elides Fanon's and Ngugi's contributions to the culturalist position, while he castigates Ngugi for his Marxism, and especially his Marxist defence of women. Owomoyela's view is that if the African heritage and cultural difference have to be protected, preserved and maintained, African languages are the vehicles through which this politico-historical-cultural specificity can be achieved. This, ironically, resonates with the position which Fanon and especially Ngugi, defend.

Echoing the Sapir-Whorf linguistic determinism hypothesis, both Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong'o articulated the view that language determines a person's basic ontology and cultural metaphysics. Indeed, while articulating the alienating influence of foreign languages, Fanon (1967:38) argues that to speak an alien language is to acknowledge, accept and interiorise the culture inherent in it, for 'To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture'. Fanon thus conceives of language as a reservoir of culture with ontological status. In a passage that assumes a Sapir-Whorfian position, he describes the problem of the influence of French on the Antillian native in transforming them into 'white Negroes' thus:

The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of

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<sup>6</sup> For the debate that ensued from Tangwa's piece see, Bongasu Tanla Kishani (1994); Chris Uroh (1994); and Godfrey Tangwa (1995). For further arguments against this view, see Ayo Bamgbose (1990). In our context, Neville Alexander has devoted much energy into the Language Question.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Gabriel Okara (1970) and an interview of Es'kia Mphahlele by Richard Samin (1997).

the French language. I am not unaware that this is one of man's attitudes face to face with Being. A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language (Fanon 1967:18).

This, for Fanon, constitutes one kind of alienation, existential alienation. At the political and ideological level, language becomes an instrument of power tied to class. In a colonial or neo-colonial situation only a few acquire *petit bourgeoisie* (intellectuals) status through colonial education. Since every language has words full of ideological connotation and value ladenness, those who learn the language, absorb and interiorise the ideology of the ruling class. They begin to see the language and values of the coloniser as a means of enlightenment and social progress. As they seek to be European, the colonised are increasingly alienated from their individuality and culture, in short, from their Africanity.

Expanding on Fanon, Ngugi addresses the problem of how culture relates to language and how the self participates in that relation—in other words, does language construct culture or does culture construct language. For him, language is both the constructed and the constructor of culture. Since this is the case, to write in a European language is to risk being absorbed into the culture manifested by that language. Hence he states:

Language, any language, has a dual character: It is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture .... Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries ... the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world (Ngugi 1986:13-16).

Articulating the role of language as a technology of power, Ngugi argues that the domination of native languages by languages of the imperial power, is critical to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised. Thus, in the colonial school:

[t]he language of an African child's formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. Thought in him took the visible form of a foreign language .... [The] colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition (Ngugi 1986:17).

Ngugi's subsequent decision to write in his African language was a conscious reaffirmation of the dignity of African languages and also a liberation or decolonisation of the African mind.

Owomoyela's exploration of the 'Language Question' is unfortunately clouded by his passionate anti-Marxism, such that he becomes incapable of seeing any convergence of views between himself and the Marxists. In his view, besides being 'indisputably a European product', Marxism is also anti-African—languages in particular—for it propagates the use of colonial Western languages in African literature, Ngugi, a Marxist, notwithstanding. One would have thought that Owomoyela, in the spirit of, for instance, Kwame Nkrumah in *Consciencism*, would find common course and convergence between socialism and African communalism. On the contrary, one would also have thought that a possible line of attack against Marxism would be that taken by Tsenay Serequeberhan in his article 'Karl Marx and African Emancipatory Thought' in which he deconstructs the Eurocentrism in Marx's metaphysics. This, however, does not happen, for the simple reason that Owomoyela's main focus is on African Marxist literary critics who 'claim for it [Marxism] the right to usurp the space of indigenous systems of social organization' (p. 94).

A reading of Ngugi reveals much more in common between him and Owomoyela than what the latter is willing to admit. Ngugi's main concern is fundamentally the problem of alienation in Africa, particularly that of Westernised African intellectuals. This concern is primordially not different from Owomoyela's. For, Ngugi laments the alienating effects of European languages, culture, politics and values on the African mind. His project, just as Owomoyela's, is the decolonisation of the African mind from invidious Eurocentrism. According to him, colonial education had only one object: 'to alienate oneself [the African] from one's immediate environment, and so by implication identify with Europe' (Ngugi 1985:21). It is therefore ironic that Owomoyela should not only take issue with Ngugi's so-called 'Eurocentric Marxist feminism' but completely ignore him when discussing the 'Language Question'.

Furthermore, a position that does not take the issue of language and power into serious account, as Owomoyela's position, is inadequate. In South Africa, the work of Elizabeth de Kadt<sup>8</sup>, with its focus on power relations and language, continues and develops the Ngugian tradition. According to her, the dominance of a particular language in a multi-lingual society such as South Africa, is contingent on the existing and prevailing power relations within that particular society (de Kadt 1991; 1996). The fact that Mandela or Buthelezi would use English rather than Zulu when addressing millions of Zulu-speaking rural people in Kwa-Zulu Natal is an indication of the location of power; not in rural Zululand but in Lower Houghton, London or New York<sup>9</sup>. Sport in South Africa is without doubt highly racialised. Thus, the fact

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the interlink between language and power, especially within the South African context, see the work of Elizabeth de Kadt (1991; and 1996).

<sup>9</sup> See Herbert Vilakazi (1997) and Neville Alexander (1997).

that soccer—a sport with predominantly black spectators in this country—should be broadcast in English on TV when rugby or cricket very seldom have commentary in an African language, demonstrates the power relations and the location of power in this society. Finally, the fact that at universities located in Africa such as the Universities of Zululand or Durban-Westville or Natal, only one African language—among so many in South Africa and Africa—and a host of European languages (English, French, German, Latin, etc.) are offered as courses for a degree, aptly demonstrates where power is located: Europe.

There is more to the presence of English than meets the eye. Europe has infiltrated the African's secret corners: homes, meetings, social gatherings, literature, family and interpersonal relations. Europe becomes the mediator in the lives of Africans who use English—whether domesticated or not—as a medium of communication. The ubiquity of English arrests the African's effort to overcome European power and tutelage. Sartre's observations in his 'Black Orpheus' are worth citing here:

In order to incite the oppressed to unite, they [black leaders] necessarily rely on the words of the oppressor's language ... the colonist has arranged to be the eternal mediator between the colonized; he is there—always there—even when he is absent, even in the most secret meetings. And since words are ideas, when the Negro declares in French that he rejects French culture, he accepts with one hand what he rejects with the other; he sets up the enemy's thinking apparatus in himself, like a crusher. This would not matter: except that this syntax and vocabulary—forged thousands of miles away in another epoch to answer other needs and designate other objects—are unsuitable to furnish him with the means of speaking about himself, his own anxieties, his own hopes (Sartre 1988:301).

Thus, in many different ways, the language of the colonialist in a (post)-colonial context is used against the natives. Whether in school, cinema, television etc. the colonised is constantly reminded of her language deficiency. Until the skewed existing power relations are transformed, the inequalities and hierarchisation of languages will continue to remain intact.

Given the practical, economical, class and even social problems associated with writing (m)other tongue, perhaps a more rational approach under the present prevailing power relations between the West and Africa, is to posit what psycholinguists call co-ordinate bilingualism. This is the view that human beings have the ability to operate in two or more languages in such a way that neither language and its cultural or worldview baggage become hegemonic. Such a person is able to cross 'cultural and cognitive boundaries to a different mental universe'

(Mazrui 1993:352) each time she/he speaks either language. In essence, as Mazrui (1993:352) points out, 'a coordinate bilingual 'controls' two cultures and two 'worldviews' corresponding to the two languages in his/her repertoire'. In my view, this constitutes a weaker culturalist position which claims that, because language has some influence on cognition in a culturally specific manner, therefore, the privileging of African languages in Africa for the Africans is a necessary condition for the maintenance and protection of African cultural difference. The central concept here is 'privileging' because it does not completely exclude other languages but merely strongly recommend the use of indigenous languages. There are, to be sure, other equally competing influences on cultural specificity. But, the advantage of this view is that, because of its anti-determinism, it thus creates space for Africans to denounce the privileging of foreign languages while at the same time writing in English themselves, as Owomoyela grudgingly acknowledges.

The centrality of language in any (post)-colonial country therefore, cannot be overemphasised. As Rob Nixon (1994:55) aptly states,

If the language, as centerpiece of a national cultural identity, is weakened, that may hasten other forms of decline. It may readily enfeeble, for instance, land or educational claims—to regional autonomy or to schooling in pupil's mother tongue.

## **Ethnophilosophical Difference**

African philosophers have scarcely discussed the Language Question in the serious manner in which African literary figures have done. Yet, the language problem has emerged every now and then. The question, therefore, about which language(s) African philosophy should be conducted in is a question about identity and difference. Two articles articulate Owomoyela's concern with the Language Question and its links with African philosophy. The first, 'Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration' continues the argument about language and culture through the debate between ethnophilosophy (Temples; Kagame; Mbiti; etc.) and professional philosophy (Pauline Hountondji; Kwasi Wiredu; Peter Bodunrin; Odera Oruka; etc.) in African philosophy. The chief targets are the 'professional philosophers' who Campbell Mamoh refers to as the African 'neo-positivists'. According to Owomoyela, the neo-positivists are guilty of anti-ethnophilosophy, anti-recidivism, anti-African culture and tradition and finally anti-African studies programmes. In short, in the same way as Westernised African novelists and writers valorise and promote the use of Western languages in African literature (chapter One), so Westernised African professional philosophers valorise Western philosophical canon and methodology (scientific) over and against ethnophilosophy, culture and tradition.

But, he argues, the valorisation of Western methodologies and science are misguided precisely because the belief in a world of ancestors and spirits, though pre-scientific, is a requisite counteragent to the scientific approach to nature. That Africa has been conquered by the West in no way indicates that African values and belief systems are inferior to Western value systems. The difference between Africa and the West is a consequence of difference of values in different civilisations. Owomoyela embodies the 'deconstructive challenge' of African philosophy which aims at unveiling 'Eurocentric residues in modern Africa that still sanction—in the guise of science and enlightenment—the continued political subordination and intellectual domination of Africa' (Serequeberhan 1991:22).

Owomoyela's attempt to spell out the conditions for the possibility of African Philosophy, rescued from the trappings of neo-positivism, is unfortunately philosophically disappointing. It certainly does not fully articulate the conditions necessary for African Philosophy to thrive, as the title suggests, but continues the interrogation of African literature. Macien Towa, on the contrary—who in my opinion is unfortunately lumped together with Hountondji as a neo-positivist valorising Western ethos—in his 'Conditions for the Affirmation of a Modern African Philosophical Thought' enunciates institutional, material and methodological conditions for affirming African thought system as philosophical. The failure of Owomoyela's project however, may be explained by the fact that for him, African philosophy should be defined in terms of an all inclusive 'African knowledge, or what I have chosen to call African philosophy' (p. 67). Hence, part of his project is to explore 'issues pertaining to knowledge in Africa' (p. 62), a mammoth task not to be treated in a single 236-page book, I must say.

Chapter Five deals with the interesting and heavily contested issue of 'the supposed distinction between traditionalism and modernism'. According to Owomoyela, modernism, and all the characteristics ascribed to it—rationality, empiricism, efficiency, motion, change, technology, democracy, empathy, literacy, consensus etc.—has, especially through the media and the Gulf War been paraded as the sole property of the West and in particular of America. In other words, there is a tendency to insidiously interlock modernisation and Westernisation, such that all that does not obey or even attempts to resist Western standards, gets disqualified as 'traditional'. The result is that Third World and other developing countries are automatically excluded from the ranks of the modern because they are presumed to be 'traditional'. As a consequence, 'traditional' peoples come 'under pressure to distance themselves from their cultures and convert to Westernism, to become whites ... because the Western option offers a better existence overall' (p. 104). In other words, 'modernism is familiarity with Western realities and adoption of Western ways' (p. 105). His argument is that characteristics (modernity) imputed to Western culture are not the sole prerogative of the West but are also part of the African tradition. Modernity has

to be explored from the different positions and perspectives represented by other forms of knowledge, of agency, and other ways of life in the world arena.

Chapters six and seven examine the issue of gender in traditional Africa. First, gender representation in the works of influential African writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*, and Miriama Ba's *So long a Letter*, are examined and found to be wanting. Influenced by Western feminists' perspective, and Western ideologies, these writers, according to Owomoyela, fail to investigate gender relationships in African societies from an African perspective. The problem therefore is that knowledge and values from the analysis of one society are applied to another radically different society. Approached and analysed from an African perspective, Owomoyela avers, gender relations in traditional African societies are not as oppressive as they are depicted and represented. Then follows (chap. 7) a defence of specific African practices and institutions such as marriage, the supposed imposition of marriage on women, the alleged perversion of polygyny etc.

Owomoyela's discussion of gender brings to mind Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's book *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformation* (1994). Her thesis is that Africa's problem-plagued terrain can be rehabilitated and that women are integral to the recovery process. Owomoyela seems to agree with this and approvingly quotes the Women's Research and Documentation Center newsletter in Nigeria (Wordoc) which urges that 'Both sexes (or genders) must certainly take a hand in building the modern nation, one whose structures must be the recognition of the equality of the sexes' (p. 140). But here the agreement ends, because Ogundipe-Leslie accuses African men, a charge that applies with equal force to Owomoyela, not only of double standards but also of resisting gender equality. African men, she argues, 'seem to be often riled by the idea of equality between men and women. They are not opposed to equal opportunity, equal pay for equal work, or equal education, but with equality between men and women, they are uncomfortable' (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994:209). The validity of this discomfort surfaces in Owomoyela's insistence that by 'equality of the sexes ... I do not mean sameness of the sexes' (p. 140).

Chapter eight continues the argument for African difference in the field of African Studies programmes. It defends charges made on African Studies as an invention of Europeans designed to facilitate the subjugation and colonisation of Africa. But, the author asserts, 'we can safely assert that since the 1960's at least, African Studies has been in the main non-hegemonic and anti-colonial' (p. 217). The problem, however, is that the discipline has largely attracted scholars who not only lack commitment to Africa but harbour patronal attitudes as well. His general argument is that African Studies programmes and Africanists, while passing off as champions of African interest, have consciously or unconsciously pathologised Africa and Africanity. The irony of this chapter for us in South Africa is that despite being in

and of the African continent, African Studies departments (programmes) are visibly absent (forbidden?) in our institutions, especially at Historically Black Universities.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, cultural resistance has always been an integral and determining component of Africa's struggle for liberation and resistance against Western hegemony. Amílcar Cabral, the foremost African theorist who stressed culture as a site of resistance to foreign domination, warned long ago that the domination of a people 'can be maintained only by the permanent and organised repression of the cultural life of the people concerned ... for as long as part of that people can have cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation' (Cabral 1979:139f). The struggle and resistance against Western cultural imperialism to which Cabral refers has its historical roots in earlier cultural-political concepts such as Negritude, African Personality and Black Consciousness and is presently expressed through Afrocentricity. When one considers the broad ideas of these articulations, it seems clear that one of the major problems that has for so long dominated them is that of identity and difference.

If Afrocentricity is the restitutive act of inscribing authentic African subjectivity; if subjectivity is negotiated within the terrain of culture; if Afrocentricity is a struggle whose goal is de-alienation and decolonisation of the African subject; if it is an assault on the authority and universalistic pretensions of Western culture, if it seeks to dispense with alien views and make Africans and people of African descent in diaspora African-centered; and lastly, if, as Molefi K. Asante (1996:61) holds, Afrocentricity 'is concerned with African people being the subjects of historical and social experiences rather than objects in the margins of European experience', then, *The African Difference* is an Afrocentric critique of African literature par excellence, Owomoyela's protestations against certain Afrocentric claims over Egypt notwithstanding. European occupation of Africa, as Oluoch Imbo observes, forced a choice upon African people: They could either embrace the difference (from Europeans) attributed to them by colonial discourse, or they could deny any difference and assert the equal worth of their humanity. Owomoyela does neither of the two. He steadfastly refuses to embrace the difference attributed to the Africans by colonial discourse and he simultaneously does not deny the difference. He reconfigure this difference in a different manner.

African people, as represented by Owomoyela, desire nothing else than simply respect and recognition for being different. They are proud to be different and do not wish to be assimilated to the mainstream Western culture, but at the same time do not want to be discriminated against or regarded as inferior because of their difference. In the words of Tzvetan Todorov, 'we want an equality which does not



necessarily entail identity, but also difference, which does not degenerate into superiority /inferiority (in Larrain 1994:32).

This is certainly a richly rewarding text for all those concerned with the relationship between African intellectuals and the culture from which they come. Indeed, the relevance of *The African Difference* to (post)apartheid South Africa is unquestionable. For the questions and issues articulated by Owomoyela are to a large degree the same issues and concerns articulated and grappled with by recent publications such as, William Makgoba's *Mokoko: The Makgoba Affair* (1997), and Kwesi Kwaa Prah's *Beyond the Colour Line: Pan-Africanist Disputations* (1997).

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## *Alternation*

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Attach a cover page to one manuscript containing the following information: Author's full name, address, e-mail address, position, department, university/ institution, telephone/fax numbers, a list of previous publications and a written statement that the manuscript has not been submitted to another journal for publication.

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